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THE DECAY OF ECCLESIASTICISM.

THE decay of ecclesiasticism does not, on the surface, look like a dangerously rapid rot. One has no need to ask, with Gloucester, "The church? Where is it?" The splendor of the Vatican Council, the tenacious hold of priestly ideas and ideals, even in Protestantism, seem to indicate a rather vigorous vitality in ecclesiasticism. There are not wanting floating facts to comfort those who are patiently waiting for the ebb tide toward mediævalism. The new edition of the English "Tourists' Church Guide" cheers the faithful with the report of an increase, for the past year, in the use of eucharistic vestments of 53, in altar-lights of 129, in the adoption of the eastward position of 214. But no prudent priest should let himself be blinded by such refreshing items. The swiftest mountain brook will have many a swirl where the current seems making backward, while all the time the general trend is onward toward the open sea. Rome is steadily losing her hold over her ancient territories, and in our land, where she seems to be making such astonishing headway, the gain is in reality chiefly nominal—the transference to our shores of her flock from the old world, whose young slip, practically, out from beneath her crook in a generation. The Protestant churches are following hard after the anti-ecclesiastical ideals of the Reformation. Outside of all churches there is massing a large and ever-enlarging body of the unchurched. Beneath the surface of Christendom, the amazing growth of Spiritualism is an ominous portent for ecclesiastics; since, whatever its rootings in fact or in fancy, it is thrusting itself up beneath the dogmatic platforms of the churches, and pushing hosts of men and women off into "the open" of a free, simple, natural religion. The decay of ecclesiasticism is going on so fast that the careful observer need no longer watch the centuries in order to note its progress, the decades marking clearly the stages of this dissolution. Its causes are patent.

The political and social revolution that has been progressing through Western civilization is sweeping away caste and privilege. The divine right of priests is following the divine right of kings to the lumber-loft of superstitions. A king may indeed well have a divine right to rule a society, as a priest to guide men's souls, but in each case that right divine is now seen to lie in his personality, and not in his office—in the man, and not in his clothes. The sacerdos is already an anachronism ; he is disappearing in the minister of the congregation, who knows no mysteries not open to the ecclesia, and wields no powers not shared by the free citizens of the Republic of God. The industrial revolution is accelerating this decay of ecclesiasticism. When labor had no voice in the voting of supplies, the budget of a priesthood might pass unchallenged. As the serf becomes the freeman, economically, the good Jew of whom Boccaccio tells could no longer thus report of the sacred city : “ He saw all men so covetous and greedy of coin, that everything was bought and sold for ready money. And more brokers were there to be found than in Paris, attending upon all trades of manifest simony.”

The gold of honest toil will do something better than buy masses for the dead, and build jeweled shrines for sacred dolls, and salary a Primate of England with the income of nearly four hundred workingmen. *Cui bono?* is a query that prunes down very judiciously a flamboyant ecclesiasticism.

The opening of new spheres for human activity drains off the energies that formerly went to the building up of ecclesiasticism. Gossip prevails at “ tea-fights ” in a back country village, until the railroad connects it with the great world, and women learn to survey larger grounds than their neighbors' back yards. While the church was the chief political institution, its offices the highest spoils of placemen, its dogmas the only knowledge open to the intellect, its vast and venerable life the one current upon which men could throw themselves to be borne out beyond the stagnating shallows of earth, ecclesiasticism naturally flourished. Its decay began in Western civilization when Gutenberg drew the first sheets from his rude block-type, when the guilds of the free towns of Germany came into civic power, when the Vittoria sailed proudly into port from her three-and-a-half years' cruise around the globe, when Galileo affirmed “ *e pur si muove*,” and opened a new universe upon the human mind. That decay has progressed as the

forces that once fed the imposing body of Catholicism have been drawn off into public affairs, industry, the sciences, the arts, and the varied spheres of our now rich human life. It must continue to advance as life spreads out into ever new and nobler fields, finding in them no forbidden grounds but the garden of the heavenly Father, which his children are to dress and keep, whose beautiful order is to prove the Kingdom of God upon earth.

The growth of knowledge has intensified the decay of ecclesiasticism. Ignorance creates the climate in which this ism flourishes. In every land the oxygenating of the mental atmosphere with knowledge has caused a rapid shrinkage in its portly priesthood. The temple has crumbled as the free school has risen. The priest has lost his grip of the lad that held a primer in his hand. Rome's instinct has proven true. Her one deadly foe is Science. Each new bit of knowledge now makes man more independent of the tutor that dealt with him as with a babe. Every error proven upon the infallible dry-nurse has weakened her authority over him, and Reason gains his fuller trust with each new victory to which she leads him. No man can be an unquestioning child of the church who once finds out for himself any knowledge, and discerns in it a segment of the universal law that is sweeping through nature. Henceforth he will bother his priest with troublesome questions, will insist on testing that which he is bidden receive in faith, and will find himself growing daily further off from his spiritual pedagogue.

The supreme folly of every ecclesiasticism is to cherish the disease of omniscience. Attempting to speak oracularly upon all mysteries, it has spread the legs of the cathedra out over the whole globe, and thus it has come to pass that no discovery can be made without undermining some prop of an infallible church. Astronomy, geology, anthropology, history, criticism, all, in affirming their several truths, have denied, of necessity, some error of the church, which knew everything in the heavens above and the earth beneath and the waters under the earth. In particular, the spread of knowledge has taught man the origin and history and nature of ecclesiastical institutions themselves, in such a manner as renders it impossible for most educated people longer to regard them with the superstitious awe that is essential to a priesthood's continued power? What a silent revolution such a book as Dean Stanley's "*Christian Institutions*" must work in the mind of the average churchman, who is open to light,

and has hitherto regarded surplice and crosier and baptismal font, with their kindred symbols, as the sacred mysteries of a supernatural priesthood, to be discussed with bated breath ! Yet this book of the brave dean is but mildly iconoclastic in comparison with the revelations made to the good churchman in other modern works. There is, in fact, as we now see, nothing in the externals of the Christian church that is not a survival from the churches of paganism. Tonsured head and silvery bells and swinging censer, Christmas and Easter festivals, holy Madonna with her child, the sacramental use of water and bread and wine, the very sign of the cross—all are ancient human institutions, rites, and symbols. Scratch a Christian, and you come upon a pagan. Christianity is a re-baptized paganism.

In all this there is nothing that really faults these ancient usages, as expressions of humanity's religious sense. Rather do these survivals from a venerable past acquire a new reverence in the minds of the wise, from their antiquity, their clustering associations, and their insistent affirmation of a somewhat real and true behind each symbol. But this honor is the rational homage due to humanity's sacred things, not a superstitious homage to magical marvels. The glamour is irrecoverably gone from the priest's spells. The deepening of the ethical and spiritual life of man aggravates the decay of ecclesiasticism. The priest has never led man very far on in the road to "pure religion and undefiled." He has doubtless had a needful part to play in training the mass of men in "the beggarly elements" of religion. The bottomless chair swung from the ceiling, and shutting in the baby, with his feet just touching the floor, may be a needful training for Rollo learning to walk, but it is eminently advisable for Rollo to spring out from its coddling arms as soon as possible, and walk for himself, even though with many a tumble. As long as he fears that he cannot stand alone, he will clutch at it as for his life. When he finds the miracle achieved, he cries to get out, and proudly waves his nurse away. Thus the growing soul comes to find that it can stand upon its own feet in walking with God. Paradoxical as it may sound to the pretty priestlet just blooming from the seminary, it is because man has found a shorter cut to heaven that he no longer sends for a priest to shrive his soul. Victor Hugo needs no father confessor at his bedside, no *viaticum* in starting for

"That undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns."

He knew, even though he had never read it, this fine Lacedemonian saying, which Plutarch gives us :

“ *Spartan.* Is it to thee, or to God, that I must confess ?

Priest. To God.

Spartan. Then, man, stand back ! ”

The end of every human institution is to make itself superfluous.

These are some of the factors working the decay of ecclesiasticism. No tears need be shed over its decomposition. Its evils are not hard to find, nor are they so slight as to leave us indifferent to the ending of this old order, which is yielding place to new. When the ecclesia becomes an ecclesiasticism, that which God hath joined together man puts asunder. A division is at once made between the church and the world. Religion becomes attention to the things of the divine order found in the ecclesia. The order of the great world without is not a divine order, and religion has nothing to do with it but to leave it alone, or to supplant it, as the papacy tried to do. Secular then becomes the synonym for irreligious, and we have, as the logical issue of ecclesiasticism, our modern secularism, that curious bugaboo of the priest, and more curious idol of the so-called infidel. Curious indeed that pious men should ever dream that setting this world at rights was not heavenly business, and more curious that reasonable men should get up any enthusiasm over the endeavor to deprive earthly affairs of their noblest inspiration ; possible, indeed, this latter folly, only as a blind revolt from a false form of religion. The crass atheism of the English secularist is the obverse of the disguised atheism of the English priest, be he Roman or Anglican, the infidelity that believes in no divine life outside the churchly pifold. When the mob clamors for the *déchéance* of God, it is because his ministers of state have withdrawn from the government of his kingdom to attend to the court ceremonies of the Most High. Bradlaugh does not look like the child of Cardinal Newman, but he is.

In this divorce, ecclesiasticism withdraws from the great world's affairs the very forces that are imperatively needed to purify and ennoble the ideals of business and politics. A man has only a given amount of force, physical, mental, and moral. If his energies are absorbed in one sphere, they cannot overflow into other spheres. The true ecclesia should study such simplicity of mechanism as would free the energies and enthusiasms of its members to drive a

world, instead of merely running a church ; and there should be as little soakage as possible in the pipes that are laid to carry the waters of the river of life into the dry fields of earth ; whereas, ecclesiasticism's big wheels take so much force to turn them, that their belts move the world's looms but languidly, and its pipes absorb so much grace that the desert by no means blossoms as the rose. Ethical forces for all the reforms of society are stored in the Christian church, but the battery is insulated by ecclesiasticism. As this falls away, the power will be turned on for which the world is waiting to-day. The minister, in ceasing to be the priest, is stepping down from his glass stool, and at his living touch the wires of heaven's forces are connecting with the store and the factory, and in the towns and villages of our land conscience is quickening trade and industry and civic government, as charged through the prophets of social righteousness.

As inevitably follows from the unlawful divorce on which ecclesiasticism has insisted, religion itself has suffered quite as much as the world that it deserts. An arrest of circulation is as bad for spirit as for body. The natural flow through the social organism checked, the blood, which is the life thereof, stagnates, corrupts, dies. Wherever ecclesiasticism has flourished, pure religion has decayed. The earlier, simple, direct relationship of the human soul to its God has been barred by the growth of rites and ceremonies, of rituals and symbols, of codes and creeds ; and the institution whose function was the culture of religion has left man without God in the world. The East tells the same tale as the West. The first effort of every reformation in religion is to tear away the parasitic growth that had been sucking out the life of the ecclesia. The Buddha and the Christ found a common foe. The new Christianity would have been dead ere this in the womb of the papacy but for the cesarian operation that Luther performed upon the church. Ethics invariably become corrupt in an ecclesiasticism. The overtrained conscience becomes morbid, priggish, hypocritical. A priesthood not only overtrains conscience, it mistrains it. It corrupts its simplicity, emasculates its energy, perverts its action. Staying away from confession, breaking the Sabbath, failing in due masses for the dead—these become the sins most dwelt upon. The Italian brigand rises from his knees before the Madonna to plunge his stiletto gayly in the heart of the belated traveler. Clarendon tells us that when Charles II. was in Scotland, “the clergy reprehended him

very sharply if he smiled on these days" (Sundays). Fancy good parsons rebuking that royal rake for smiling on Sundays ! Ordinary offenses against the common law of morality can be atoned for in current coin, and crimes are scaled in the indulgence-market in thalers and groschen, Tetzels table giving the exact pecuniary equivalent of a murder or a rape. Thus the church opens "the kingdom of heaven to all" cash-payers. The legend over a Quebec convent runs thus : "Alms will save your soul." It is said that after a late South American "unpleasantness" there were found on the bodies of some of the dead, passports signed by the bishop of the diocese, and addressed to St. Peter, directing him to "admit the bearer as a true son of the church." The most cruel customs, the most tyrannous laws, the most beastly usages, have existed undisturbed beneath the eyes of a fat and flourishing priesthood. The church that had a ritual of exorcism for poor old witches had no "use" for the dispossession of the infamous *jus primæ noctis*, that well-nigh inconceivable privilege of power which was once a recognized feature of the marriage ceremony in certain parts of Christendom. Ecclesiastics have drawn the sacred sign of the cross upon the sword, the gibbet, and the yoke ; have countersigned with the approval of heaven the impoverishing *taille*, and have baptized the Virgin, whose steely arms opened in the embrace of death.

The influence of ecclesiasticism in the sphere of thought has been quite as mischievous as in the realm of action. It has assumed the function of the intellectual teacher of man, without the equipment of the scholar or the resources of the genius. It has fostered that worst of monopolies, an esoteric doctrine, for the initiate, which left the people to the follies of exoteric dogma. It has claimed for its deliverances an authority other than that of the self-evidencing truthfulness of the tenets taught, clothing its oracles with the awful majesty of a supernatural revelation, and announcing the majority vote of its councils as with the very voice of the Holy Ghost. It has arrogated to its pronouncements the infallibility of the Eternal himself, and has treated suspicion thereof as a case for the Holy Inquisition. It has denied to the human reason its natural right of free inquiry and of honest thought, and has chained the mind in the most degrading of slaveries. It has arrested the progress of the intellect in the Western world for centuries. In lieu of the calm tolerance of opinion in imperial

Rome, it has introduced a savage strife worse than that of arms, in which a difference of an iota in a description of the person of Jesus set bishops belaboring each other with "apostolic blows and knocks," and the shame of lectures upon the philosophy of Greece was zealously expiated by the pious monks of Alexandria; "Cyril's dogs" hounding down a Hypatia, and scraping her flesh from her bones with the shells of the Mediterranean strand. As early as the age of the Clementine Homilies, we find this warning: "Wherefore, above all, remember to shun apostle or teacher or prophet who does not first accurately compare his preaching with (that of) James." As late as the days of the evangelic Rutherford, we hear the old warning repeated: "If ye depart from what I taught you in a hair-breadth, . . . I take heaven and earth to witness that ill shall come upon you in end." What he taught, how well do many of us remember, from the time when we tried to feed on him, and thought ourselves carnal because we could not relish the diet.

Ecclesiasticism has closed Christendom against the one true source of knowledge of the Divine Being whom it has professed to reveal—the laws most truly revealed in the nature that is his handiwork. Its doctors have been thus kept away from the data for a true theology, and the inadequacy of its creeds, as symbols of the eternal mysteries, has been thereby most effectually guaranteed. Theology has been denied the chance of progress, by the correction of the guesses of the past in the knowledge of the present, and the symbol of divine truth has been found in a fossil. From all spheres of knowledge not compassed by the ecclesiastic mind the possession of religious truth has been ruled out, and savants have thus been taught to regard science, not as a prism catching the beams of the Creator, but as a looking-glass reflecting the conceited consciousness of the creature.

The revolt of the human reason from the church to-day is almost wholly the result of the usurpation of authority by ecclesiastics, and men in ever-increasing numbers are exiling themselves from the homes of their fathers, because the priesthoods of Rome and of Protestantism allow them no freedom of thought and speech in the ancestral mansions, but only the slavery of superstition or the silence of cowardice. No crass and blatant Philistinism can create a tithe of the infidelity that logically flows from the typical formula of ecclesiasticism given in the Atharva-Veda, a formula needing

only a change of nomenclature to fall naturally from the lips of the Christian hierarchy :

“All that exists is in the power of the gods. The gods are under the power of magical conjurations. The magical conjurations are under the control of the Brahmins. Hence the gods are in the power of the Brahmins.”

In short, the characteristic evils of our life and thought, as viewed from a religious standpoint, chiefly indicate the sequelæ of the lingering disease of ecclesiasticism. Well may Inman write, in the preface to “Ancient Pagan and Modern Christian Symbolism : ”

“The greatest curse to a nation is . . . a form of faith which prevents manly inquiry. . . . So long as every man does to other men as he would that they should do to him, and allows no one to interfere between him and his Maker, all will go well with the world.”

He that levels his lance against ecclesiasticism is not as yet attacking a corpse. This world-old tyrant does not die with such happy dispatch as to make it superfluous to let a little blood occasionally. Giant Pope is old and toothless, but he sits before his den with the same unregenerate heart as of old ; cunning where he used to be brutal, holding hosts still under the spell woven in his more masterful days. When last he seated himself in his cathedra to declare the oracles of God, these were the gracious words at which men wondered :

“Let him be anathema . . . who shall say that human sciences ought to be pursued in such a spirit of freedom that one may be allowed to hold as true their assertions, even when opposed to revealed doctrine ; . . . who shall say that it may at any time come to pass, in the progress of science, that the doctrines set forth by the church must be taken in another sense than that in which the church has ever received and yet receives them.”

The decay of ecclesiasticism will not prove the death of the ecclesia, but only of those fungoid growths that, twining round it, have sucked into themselves the strength of the soil of man’s spiritual nature, from whose decomposition the chemistry of life will extract the succulent juices to feed a new growth of pure religion. While the eternal mysteries abide, man’s awe before them will not disappear. While the eternal order reigns, man’s trust in it will give him hope and faith. Until man’s consciousness changes more than it has changed in the thousands of years through which we can track his story, that consciousness will affirm the ancient

verities, God and Immortality. This natural religion will find its institution, as every other natural relationship finds its institution. While the family lasts as the institute of the affections, and the state endures as the institute of rights, the church will abide as the institute of religion. Until a nobler than Jesus arises, realizing a fuller incarnation of God, the institute of religion in our Western world will bear the name of the Nazarene, and those who would walk in the spirit will call him Master. But if his church is to be the church of the future, it must needs become as free, as fluid, and as fertile as was the religion of Jesus himself. No ism of an ecclesia must gather around the simple life of the church an exaggerated estimate of its worth, a superstitious sense of its nature, a perverted activity of its functions, a tyrannous exercise of its power, an arbitrary division of life after its own lines, artificial and morbid ideals for human aspiration, a hostility to the reason which is the very word of God in man. The natural ecclesia must not again become a supernatural ecclesiasticism.

R. HEBER NEWTON.